Sven-David Sandström (1942-2019), one of Scandinavia’s most beloved composers, passed away on 10 June at the age of 76. He composed till his very last breath, and many pieces are yet to be premiered.

“There is a creativity within me that I can’t stop. It just gushes out of me.”

That is how Sven-David Sandström described his exceptional productivity in his very last public appearance – in the talk show “Summer”, that post-humously reached hundreds of thousands of Swedish radio listeners. Even in the last year of his life, during the period of his grave illness when he was often bedridden, music continued to flow from his pen. He finished his most extensive opera, The Book, based on Niklas Rådström’s visionary and dramatised rendering of the Biblical books. At the same time he put the final touches to his oratorio Uppbrott (Breaking Up) and still managed to compose some music for a grandchild who played the double bass.

Unrestrainable creativity

His production would number at least five hundred works, perhaps nearly six hundred. Sandström had lost count long ago. And the question is whether he ever included any of the compositions he had written for the desk drawer back home in Borensberg where he grew up. It was not until he was 26 years old that he began studies in the composition class at the Royal College of Music in Stockholm. Ingvart Lidholm was his teacher, and guest professors György Ligeti and Per Norgård contributed important impulses.

Sven-David Sandström would himself come to be a charismatic and influential mentor for several generations of composers. First as a composition professor at the Royal College of Music (1985-95), later at Indiana University in Bloomington, USA (1999-2008). But also at colleges in Ingeund and Falun, as well as at the Gotland School for Music Composition, which he helped to found.

Considering Sandström’s full-time position as a dynamic pedagogue over several decades, his enormous catalogue of works seems even more remarkable. The explanation is not just his unrestrainable creativity but also a discipline of compositional craft combined with a spontaneity in giving form to music. His diligence – up early in the mornings, never-wasting a free moment that could be used for composition – he claims was inherited from his father, master watchmaker Sven Sandström. From his pious free church home in Östergötland he acquired a religious faith that he would maintain throughout his life. An existential security that made possible Sven-David Sandström’s many seemingly headstrong aesthetic choices; in reality an expression of his increasing need for artistic freedom.

International renown

In 1972 he had his breakthrough with the orchestral work Through and Through, conducted by Herbert Blomstedt. Pierre Boulez soon took an interest and commissioned Utmost, which he premiered with the BBC Symphony Orchestra. The doors were thus opened to Europe and international renown. But

Sven-David Sandström would instead diverge from the modernistic mainstream of art music. An inner resistance to setting music to texts vanished. To his mind, a composer is able to hide his feelings without a text, and he was referring to a hitherto suppressed need for emotional expression.

With his interest in texts followed a focus on vocal music. Especially for choir – which Sandström was familiar with and knew from the inside in his capacity as a member of the Hägersten Motet Choir. Around 1980 a number of major choral works appeared. Sacred a cappella music such as Agnus Dei and A New Heaven and a New Earth would quickly become in demand from choirs the world over. His monumental and violently dramatic Requiem De ur alla minnen fallna (Mute the Bereaved Memories Speak) from 1982 struck down like a bomb with a scope far beyond the narrow bounds of art music; it was awarded the Nordic Council’s Music Prize.

By now Sven-David Sandström had also liberated himself from the often dogmatic modernism music community of that period. A collaboration with the young, eccentric choreographer Per Jonsson would give birth to a number of orchestral works; gestural in design and free in form. Opera – a no-go-zone for his generation – aroused his interest. Both the chamber opera Emperor Jones and the large-scale children’s opera The White Castle were staged at the Royal Swedish Opera.

Romanticism and Baroque

In 1985 Sandström entered on his post as professor of composition at the Royal College of Music in Stockholm, which did not involve any decline in the continually swelling catalogue of works. He came to develop his need for emotional expression in a new kind of instrumental music: romantic and not seldom lively and virtuosic. Many orthodox modernists were shocked by Sven-David Sandström’s tonally coloured palette, adorned with ornamental garlands, in his Neo-Romantic piano music from the years around 1990. His explanation for this was that he had a recently acquired curiosity about the Late-Romantic heritage and a fascination for the proficiency of musicians.

At the same time he began to approach Baroque church music – motets, passions, etc. – in order to, as he said, join in a great tradition. He took up Purcell’s Hear My Prayer, let it collapse and built it up again from fragments – a choral work that would come to be sung the world over. But it was Bach who was his great model and mentor. A seminal work was his grandiose High Mass (1994) 9, which followed exactly the division of movements in Bach’s Mass in B minor, but with Stravinsky-coloured rhythms. Once again Sandström caused a music-aesthetic debate, but High Mass was given an enthusiastic reception by audiences and critics alike. He himself considered the work to be his very best.

He would develop his knowledge of Bach in a series of works where he “borrowed” the text and the form, but not the tone language. He eventually felt called upon to follow Bach’s work obligation – to continually provide new music for all feast days of the church year. In 2008 Sven-David Sandström began a unique project together with Stockholm Cathedral and a suburban church in Hässelby. For a period of three years choristers had to learn to sing from pages where the ink had barely dried for High Mass on Sundays. It amounted to a complete collection of music for all sixty-six feast days of the ecclesiastical year.

Sven-David Sandström challenged himself also in other genres. He composed a clarinet concerto, Soft Music, for the jazz virtuoso Putte Wickman and his Third Symphony, which featured vocal sections, for the musical theatre artist Helen Sjöholm.

His interest in other kinds of voices than those with classical schooling was a driving force in Sandström’s thinking when it came to the opera Staden (The Town), set to the poet Katarina Frostensson’s lyrical and abstract libretto. Ten years later, in 2008, it was time for yet another big Sandström premiere at the Royal Swedish Opera: Babdśebra – this time with a text in English after a novel by Torgny Lindgren.

And after ten more years came Sven-David Sandström’s most extensive work and final opus. An epic opera of Wagnerian proportions, written purely for the sake of creative pleasure. There was no command behind the vast compositional labour that went into “The Book”. This opera is the richest gift imaginable that Sandström could bequeath to posterity.

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PHOTOS FROM LEFT: HANS ERIXON, ENAR MERKEL RYDBERG, MATS BÄCKER

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